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it was raining.

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kambani ramano
RMNKAM001

a minor dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of Master in Creative Writing.

Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town
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this work has not previously been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any
degree. it is my own work. each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this
dissertation from the work or works of other people has been attributed, and cited and
referenced.

Signed by candidate	Signature Removed
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7 February 2013

to all those who in their different ways encouraged this meditation out of me, thank you so much. I am truly grateful. there are a few people, though, who deserve special mention.

firstly, Yeshua HaMashiach. somehow You saw and salvaged me, and set me free to write.

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Grace Kim, who led me to the fountain. without your friendship, I don't think I'd be a poet. Lucy Stuart-Clark, you encouraged me to pursue this MA and many times insisted that I finish the course when I was content to simply stop. finally, Emalie Bingham. long before this collection was conceived you were already helping me shape it. your conversation and questions and work laid its foundations.

for months she dangled awkwardly above my make-shift studio space. barely-assembled, cross-legged with a single arm, handless and headless, she was to me a perfect expression of the intolerable and inevitably humorous process of trying. not just trying to create, but trying to be. she held together on the brink of collapse, perched, paused between the second and third dimension, embracing the push towards an incomprehensible structure she was not yet ready to occupy.

(Emalie Bingham, *BGE*)

after three days, the officials circulated through the camp and gave the people these orders: 'when you see the ark for the covenant of Adonai your God and the cohanim, who are L'vi'im, carrying it, you are to leave your position and follow it. but keep a distance between yourselves and it of about a thousand yards—don't come any closer, so that you will understand which way to go, because you haven't gone this way before.'

(Joshua 3.2-4, *Complete Jewish Bible*)

7

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shapeless wire
pretending to be

resisting its construction
and hiding behind words
that twist over and over

and over again
unravelling shape

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instead of rising from the dust
this house falls with wild crumbling
mad box enflamed to be razed

I was wrong to think fat clouds carried change
and rain to douse our estrangement

but who can quench what the Lord has torched
who can love what He has crushed
who can unmake what He made
or give shape to what matters most

a space-borne pear, a home

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and you come to and find yourself dangling from the past
held together by a bond
your fathers and mothers wove you with
'if you do not do what we taught you and prepared you to do
we did not exist,' they call in the blood

they are dead
yet the worm of their deeds is vigorous in their fruit
you are riddled with their holes
for before you could know, you were

offered to be devoured
consecrated for the rake
made holy for unholiness

I fell out the womb prostrate
dark with the Thathe Vondo and drenched in Lake Fundudzi's spit
my father David, who shook the forest trees with prayer
he paid tribute to the reptile in the waters
and the fallen branches there

a mighty wind blessed from his mouth
he struck his crop with blight
I cannot see who walked before him
but he was not the first to withdraw to the starshores
or touch his forehead to the dust, even so

he almost turned the river

but can waters repent of their course or the crooked straighten his end?
the tongue was willing but the legs were not
the rudder and bark at odds
while he breathed life into a thousand generations
he fused hay with precious stones

'am I diseased?' I ask
for the umpteenth time tonight
'I want to meet you bone-to-bone

'not this crowd of coats
looking for entertainment
cheap tricks of the tongue—fun

empty as it is, fun. you'd think
the insistent repetition of an act
would eventually fill what lacks

'but it doesn't. there's a lie
in the climax, a negation of desire
which draws from longing

'strife, and death from drive'

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since Gan Eden, the world has turned in its bed, 'sex as usual'
sex is normal. sex is natural. sex is normal. sex is from God?

if I say it enough times, it must be true
then my shame won't surface
please don't surface. please don't stir in my loins
if I use archaic words like 'loins', will desire be expunged?

I have burned inside my bowels and holy men have shouted
'conquer your lust. man up. pull yourself together'
I started to pull myself but got no further than a climactic self-hatred

I must be a lusty monster, black with a savage drive
no wonder she runs away. even I am scared of me
so I plead, 'please don't come near'
not with my invitations to dinner, or just a quiet coffee? but in the way my
members gesticulate
how could she hold such a hand? *(selah)*

we have fought. we wrestled. in the night I lost. I keep losing. still, I am lost

I want to be honest
this is not a confession
there is no secret tryst
into which I wish to web you

just a plain report
of things remembered
strips of skin pinned side by side
(like we lay, lied)
a vision, pieced together

my tribute to letting go—grasping
to grasp and flounder
in an empty bath

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when nobody was looking, I washed my hands
I lathered them with soap
rubbed the bubbles to a foamy coat
I let them rest under the tap
and rinsed and rinsed, when nobody was looking

then I closed the faucet, the water, my face
turned to leave
but I carried the sink away with me
my fingers were always bitter with chocolate
marmite, the blood of tomatoes
no matter how often or raw I scrubbed

so I resorted to covering up when nobody was looking
with denim and woollen skins
I warped my figure with jacketed laughter
in front of the mirror, I hid
desperate to dress my nakedness with labels
to be wrapped in the gauze of loose affection

I drifted through familiar mobs
played out the loss I cherished
I clung to it as though it held breath's kiss
instead it was the wind, dry and hostile as a brier
and everyone shuffled off
and the noise lifted
and the smell, the smell

when nobody was there, I feared the smell of my pores
caked with dust and dark, the past
I was scared it would offend them, my fair friends
the odour of my heritage:

Manyane Village, Diepkloof's shebeen
the boiled chicken of early 90s Hillbrow
we moved from plot to bigger plot
drove south in search of an unbound lot
but the bonds remained
the scarcity of the father's word
'reap from the dew, swim in the grain

be satisfied.'

authority crumbles in my hand
like clay, and

waking to birds in my ears
you in my nose, on my clothes
it's as if I've forgotten

how to be strong, as if strength
has always been an alien

horn attached to my face
– the strangeness of this place – and might
a flapping M in the sky

ever beating distance between me
and the why of its reason

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ב

I threw a ball for Baxter but it was actually a grenade but he caught it so gently
no one heard.

(Emalie Bingham, *BFA Grad Exhibition*)

a ball for Baxter

who caught it so gently

he exploded
hand grenade in mouth

take off your shoes
for this is holy ground

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for this is holy ground
a bunker
a hollow in a mound

cement and brick
washed white

lines

a pencil-hand's
dalliance up wall and roof and sky

deft fraught bare
-footed awe
an impalpable tremor

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because it is undone
they step through the door
you step through the door
I step through the door

there is violence in the polish
watchful seraphs in the stitch
bits of Baxter in the corner
I stand on his gentle lip

I step through the door
you step through the door
they step through the door
because it is undone

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angels stretch their gossamer wings
web wisps threaded by the hours
unripe work and patchwords

‘Baxter! here boy, catch the ball’

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being fed a hand grenade (and stitched back
together again, poorly) you were no egg
no Humpty Dumpty scrambled by the fall
Baxter, you were lots of chunks of dog

strewn across a park, ripped mid bark
by the pulse of a mistaken ball
roaring bloomscald orange: playtime's ball
stopped. abrupt. -ly. there was no turning back

for you or the half-caste girl or the bark
of trees that weep – willows and bleeding gums, egg
-stripped raw – with those arthritic dogs
who, weary from a life, let balding heads fall

playtime's end sparked the eruption of fall
and from the fallout of auburn gore, a ball
rolled in the wind. it was the year of the dog
it was the hour of the pin, and the girl's back

– mildew gnawed – smelt of egg
long forgotten in a dank corner. her pleading bark
made its way to sea, shook the ark
where you were asleep and woke you from your fall

-ing dream. all the king's horses, men and eggs
had salvaged you from the park (you'd been a ball
of bungled parts), and then began the voyage back
to the start: in the beginning there was a dog

but what was at the start looked no more a dog
at the end than a shipwrecked barque
looks a craft when, shell-shocked, it is towed back
to the docks for repair. the welders fall

to work. expert surgeons, they wield honed balls
of raging blue to resurrect the egg
-crushed shell from its splints. your egg
was not so lucky. it had been all the dog

in your only basket, and the surgery ball
at sea – with its glue and stitch and bark –

washed out: an ear was on your thigh, fall
was in your eyes, a tail sewn to your back

the pin-locked ball was a dangerous egg
to throw. go back to the deep, mangled dog
while autumn leaves bark, play will fill your fall

bag full of stars, barbed light
your eyes brim with leaves
rattling trees, the wind

back full of scarred memories
grasping for the sun
you were bound by base braces

to turn, keep returning
with each click of the clock
's fretful hand

to surprise unbridled butterflies

Baxter
dog of dark spring, rest now
in the cocoon's cinders

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xii

a mushroom cloud
mourning, shrouded
from fanged cascades a bark

ix

the poet stole him
from an artist

his f | r | a | m | e
was cut up
into words

ii

 in the afterbirth
he writhes, and dies

xiii

he has a blackbird
in his mouth
it swallows Baxter
(whole)

i

Baxter withers with the flowers.. .

iv

out of thunder he stumbles
... trailing his guts

xi

by twilight Baxter's s t r -
 e t c h e d over the edge
of a park

vi

the evening ruptured purple
dusk is stitched
 with Baxter

viii

(children like to wear him

as a band-aid)

v

salt river

 springs from his eyes

another crop

of loss

iii

after dragonflies

after freckled skies

after time haemorrhages

: comes Baxter

coming after always

always drowning in

the bloodwaters

x

vii

you bleed and bleed and breathe

your last—poor dog

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who killed dog Baxter?

Adam's confession, of sorts

'I' said the sparrow, 'with my bow and—'
'lies!' I said, 'you lie through your beak my friend
it was the artist in Gan Eden, no? her fingers dripped
with knowing fruit. it exploded in her mouth, the juice
before she struck with a playful throw
to be honest, though, I adulterated the game
and let her take the blame for it, but they witnessed what I did

'not just the fly, but the fish with Baxter's blood in her dish
the pall bearing wrens, the thrush who sang psalms
they all saw the deluge fall from the sky
they watched our garden dissolve in the eye of its vast embrace
gathered up into smoke, acid cloud and rain
great stockpiles of pain to vindicate the great stockpiles

we would begin hoarding for—for emergencies only, of course
for the beetle would need a world of thread
to weave a shroud large enough to cover
the nothing that remains when Owl shares Robin's grave
and we lie in the streets with our teeth in our spleens
on that day, the rook won't pray, the dove won't cry
and the bull, no longer able to pull, he will not toll the bells for the lost'

with Em, before the fall

autumn had not yet begun
to pluck the leaves off of trees
and the sky was content yet blue
when grown askew us two we stood and tried to
make sense of the forms our bodies had borne

and autumn had not yet begun too
to blast Grahamstown with plagues
word grenades les vents en bourrasques
qui venaient coup après coup
comme le chien de la déluge the dog after

the flood autumn had not yet begun
when the half-caste began to be
shreds of rotten filigree
crumbling the path in front of you
to begin to make a way

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for the half-caste in the corner

she was an off-cut
a l(eft)over trying to be square

with a big hole in the middle
like a doughnut

and you could see the person
on the other side

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she showed me who I am

the story of the cardboard girl
half-caste, half world

a figure
struggling to unbecome
the mess her mother had made of her

she was the child of a rough impulse
cut out in haste
headless, cross-legged, a chest, an arm, a waste

'a perfect expression,' Em said
'of the intolerable and inevitably humorous process of trying
not just trying to create, but trying to be'

then doused with coloured inks
she was consigned to a corner in the studio
to nurture rotten fruit

and so did Ya'akov

clasped by the truth of his mother's love
and its strength of desire
he'd been held captive by her hope for a nation

a man
a name to stand his legs on

but Yitz'chak's word was—and that the deceptive thrust
he'd had no intention to lay a floor for Ya'akov's feet
or give his son the marrow

so Ya'akov made a meal of graft to grasp at Yitz'chak's heel
and he grasped and he grasped
at last he clung to Rachel

hoping in her skin he'd found
the touch he could not steal
when his dad laid hands on him

everything is all wrong

the splintered light the acetate
the lampshade on the floor dogeared

wrong is all in the everything place
and the half-caste's face is gone

so slight her outline has become
a whimsy mist her corpse

but when her tears kiss the ground
sound shudders

everything is alright

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λ

it is more accurate to say
there was no hand grenade
no throw and catch was played

instead, bone fingers
wrung my neck, squeezed
to cut my afterbreath

my breath was stifled after
aspiration billowed my lungs
with dreams

of slipping into someone else
's skin
taken in with relish, sighs

with grateful eyes
I'd laugh a tree to life
and dare to brim with Yitz'chak

the abundant waters
of one who comes to know
a good thing:

home in a stranger's gaze

a play on divine machinations, 'Deus ex...' etc.

alighting on the stage
he was lowered by a crane, a bird

he defied the natural way and soared
out of la haine, Hades' pen

marauder of marauders
he ransacked the inferno

raised Eurydice to light

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when boils and volcanic minds erupt
sometimes the most effective medicine
is the outlandish cliché, the wonder-cure

which heals all of the world's disease
the brazen intervention which spits
splits continuity into contradictory bits

a miracle: by the machine, God

having squeezed into a vagrant's fleece
slips off His throne, is hitched to a crane
and humbled into the thick, thick pot

of life where, infamous and boiled to death,
His fame rises from Jerusalem to Jerusalem
the Olive Mount to the ends of the Cape

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for Mary Donnelly

when frost crept into my eyes
winter pelted Salt River
with the hail I failed to cry

I had failed to tell
the breeze from the hurricane

I was unable to pry myself
from the sallow feast
pity had prepared for me

to drown the sound of drowning
I rasped with laughter

as bloated as my lies
and forgot how to breathe
with the ebb and flow

of the rushing on of life
I had forgotten what it meant

to be Adam's son, not Eve's
the piercer, not the pierced
to spread my roots out to the water

I still haven't found the man
in me, but

for your balsam ear
which soothed me out of the dearth
want pressed me into

an offering of thanks:
wafers honey lilies

a jar of spikenard

in the Bergen-Belsen camp after the war

they handed lipstick to the women
and reduced the figments they'd become to bodies

faceless faces red revived
set quietly afire with thin slivers of a smile

the laughter of their flickering rose

when, with a feeling stroke,
blood returned to their names

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a man with a winter coat came in
in the glow of spring he came

after the scowl of ice had thawed
after green had begun to bask in awe
in a winter coat he came

sleet quickening his voice
fine snowflakes in his eyes

spring was frostbitter
the week he spoke
the man with winter in his coat

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the prophet's whisper quickens, slow
transforms the leper's shame to gold
on a bloody stake in spring's slough

and papered ponds unbrown to know
the green of duckweed, green of all the fronds
the prophet's whisper quickens, slow

as the rock yawns and craves kind dew
to wash the mould off tollund old
on a bloody stake in spring's slough

⌘

at the water's edge, pallid, cowed
the leper – stricken by the cold
the prophet's whisper quickens – slow

-ly yields; a waif in the shallows
a wraith of the pure bride foretold
on the bloody stake in spring's slough
when he roared with an impassioned groan

—gift grave to the bold
the prophet's whisper quickens, slow
on a bloody stake in spring's slough

I wake to August's whimper

it is Monday. the southern hemisphere is closing in on joy
but today the sun has retreated a little
hid his smile to let the broken fangs of winter bite again
in anguish, in failure

below, the drills below are drilling
holes in what should have been a gentler day
there is no peace in the city
no peace to be found in the muchness of handling papers or the pillow on the bed

it is Monday. in Khayelitsha, Venancia wakes up at 5am
she sits for an hour or two on the train

to make beds she never used
wash clothes she never wore
clean dinners she never ate
serve lords whose teeth she'll never have the bile to break

she dreams of catering and landscaping
she dreams

but who will have the grace to listen to her dreams
help her make a fruitful garden of desire
who will take her hand?

above, the clouds above are stiff
and just beyond them, in the sham of shamayim
the very 'there' of the sky, there is
a ladder and a gate
and through many tribulations I must enter it

it is Monday. spring's approach is already killing so much
of what was once so comforting
so much of the grief which warmed winter

it is Monday: the second day, the second mourning

T

at the Gautrain Station in Sandton
the escalators go down
burrowing without end, they mole their way to the beginning

I stepped off, ground zero
was ready to begin. again. to start
something in another city where nothing is new
but the wind blows

I stepped onto the platform, waited. I stood
he approached: blue with security clothes
bulletproof vest, boots. a scuffed story

of getting stuck where everyone passed
for somewhere else. everyone left. she left
too. went on to love others. better qualified
foreheads, bookish looks

he'd looked on while she climbed
out of their home. took the pass he'd sponsored
and was gone. I looked. something flashed

the rain in his eyes, the train's light

and loaded with a loaded voice
he sent me off. he said, 'success is the best
revenge.' I smiled, tired. I tried to wish him the best revenge
in the future

boarded. sat
facing back I watched the walls wave goodbye

another train, another line, another escape from loss
more of the same from Sandton Station
from Sandton to the sea of glass

π

we came to it at last, the place
stone upon stone upon chuckling stone
we came to laughter's altar
mountains danced, valleys sang
all the trees of the field clapped their hands
our rags had been washed new with blood
and all our scars turned to gold
at last, the barren gave birth to a crown

1

for months we dreamt of heading out
made plans to make plans
half-pregnant with an idea, swelling almost
we'd been trapped in the breach
between dream and decision
when, surprising ourselves even
like thieves at night we had stolen away

into mighty clouds and thunder
we drove across the border
traversed the desert plain
out there, we were silenced by mountains
so alien-rich with the world
the greater world burned near

unknowingly, we'd gone in search of it
the glory we had lost
in those expansive days of progress, change
we had changed into the wrong shape
we changed our ways
scorned wisdom's voice to drown ourselves
in the platitudes of the hour
but how we yearned for the word:
'this is true, this is true'

so we went to recover
forms whose truth had been maimed
by half-lies, dim revelations
at work in the dark
carving, shaping, charting a skew course
we'd suffered the symptoms

but did not know the cause
we did not know the roots or the ax
in our hands to cut out a new foundation
cleave a way back up the mount

π

at the right time, they must die
the old and cherished lies
we're so snugly cramped in
they must be breached for us to breathe
the wide, open plain
to which at last we have come

1

in Maine there was a woman
blind with another's sight, her mother's
and light was faithful to visit and revisit
the good place where she lived, yet to her
there was never enough good

not in the clean of the house
the take of the garden's shape
her hair and the wealth or lack of it

those exacting eyes she had borne
had had to arrive at the cloudy door,
slip through
into weightless waters, close

off beyond the searching hours
of time and light
her mother had had to drift, taking with her
the anxious cloth of years
she had been so careful to swathe
her child in, sole to crown
with meticulous love she had covered her
insistent that every crease and fold was
perfectly perfect

↑

in time, skin grows too tight
we have grown much too bright for the womb
and nurture has turned into neuter
the hour to be torn has come to tear us
into flight
to fly from threadbare sins
and perceive the wind's whispers

we were leaving the desert province
it was still dark
early, early morning
the kids were asleep in the back
dreaming, I presume
of the return of their mom and dad

you drove with fierce focus
the wheels of the Kombi kicking up a cloud of dust behind us
it coloured the coming dawn
brown with the flesh of the dirt road to Prieska

it slapped me from the brush and shrubs
a wooden sign above a gate
it was a little sign
the name of a farm
'Klein Begin', it said klein begin

such a small thing on a small morning in the dust and dark of a backroad in the
Northern Cape

but it has stayed with me, the line
'do not despise the day
small beginning'

ה

seed worlds, sprinkled in the dark

draw wings from blade to nape
bare feet upon a porcelain lake

sea, they burn sea beyond sight

in the terror that is [mute]
and the terror that breaches & breathes constellations

celestial dandelion heads, adrift

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all was quiet
and darkness covered them
chaos, the void, the still; the still

all was watery still
and it was in His will to stir
stir time with a word design: begin

in the beginning, depths groaned
hungry and void
and nothing, abounding without

darkness covered the bottomless
and – covering dark, shading it all –
a Spirit hovered. waiting

for the first ray of life to break
the first breath of light,
to see them brim and grin

He grinned: the first day

out of nothing came something
from the waters floated cotton mists
cosmic sands birthed mankind
a Potter fashioned life

His rainbow-spattered kiln's uproar
is fired by smoke that charges worlds
with a feathered touch of words:

'let a whisper soften the maelstrom
let blood syrup quicken the beam
let low heavens speckle thrush's eggs
and eggburst speckle heaven

'anoint the sickly with wings
let dormant larvae erupt
collect fireflies to torch the mind'

and in this mind's eye
let desert shrubs burst forever
as the sea bursts at dusk
into shimmering and moon ripples

which is neither concrete nor aether
but pike-skewered this barque which lists

utters lists real surreal extra-
ordinary records of cosmic flit

pear-shaped our pocked plane was hewn
from empty space and points of light

in-spun flung far hug-fast clung

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on the sixth day, when it all began
there was nothing
but seed in the sand and fire

in the heart of the world
creation was perched on the brink of germination
and man waited

to be called from the dust
fleshed out with holy breath
set apart to be loved

transfixed, the air was crisp
with perfect conditions
for life and the newborn sun to glory
the stars to frolic with rejoicing

it was right
for the Maker to bend to His haunches
dig His hands into clay

to craft from mud a family

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what is the correlation between us and the stars
the sons of men and the host of heaven's lamps? *(selah)*

on the fourth day, Yahweh put the cosmic legislature in place
to inaugurate time's time, set the clock in motion
to preside over the seasons, days, and years

He said to them, 'govern'

'you lessor light, you greater, you stars; govern the earth
decree seed-time and harvest, hailstorm and sun

'scatter day's radiant seed on the ground
let it reap great oaks and faith from the scion
let it warm dead kernels in the dust, draw
from the lessor husk, the greater

'let the meek assembly of the heights count the months
halo them, pass them around

'crowned above the circle of the earth
let the justice of your course, like a fiery sceptre
burn both at noon's burnished gate, and
in the fragrant hours of the nightwatch'

for you are very precious to God
be gentle with yourself and with the earth (selah)

when it seemed as though the months had outlived winter
instead of warm came snow
again the sky was iron with cold
the climb toward spring's hearth was sleet-deranged and slush

had the south drifted from the sun's feet?
had we cursed dawn's stores of kindling, night's oven, salty sleep?

determined to bake towers
we left the ox of wisdom behind in the field
to be ploughed by the seasons, ripened in the fullness of time

to tend to the seed (selah)

be gentle with yourself and with the earth
for you are very precious to God

for Mrs Twins

it is much like any other, today
and never seen before

perhaps the wind is blowing
or it could be still
... blowing? no, still still

like the ocean never is
for the moon incessantly tugs

at the sea, ever woos
with voluptuous light
earth's unbuttoned cloak

to leap crazed into space

leaving the planet bare as a babe
its squishy parts exposed
to the delight of those geologists

who have grown grim puzzling over
what lies beneath

at the bottom of the sea?
a great big bottom, I presume
and perhaps a whale and dragonfish

seated at a table
to take some toast and tea

after the flood.

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after the flood, Noach farmed and was the first to plant a vineyard. he drank so much wine he got drunk and lay naked in his tent.

(paraphrase of Genesis 9.20, *Complete Jewish Bible*)

University of Cape Town

it was raining, but the years have clouded my vision now. the impression is all that remains. and a longing for Jerusalem. even then, unknowingly, I was on the road back home.

we drove out to the edge of town. we turned onto the gravel road which would carry us to the bunker. it glistened red with mud. the puddles were thick. rain had been falling all day and we were on our way to the old brick-making furnaces. after the last bricks had been baked and the oven fires smothered, a commune took up residence on the property. under their charge, 'the Tunnels' – the name their second life was baptised with – played host to the periodic trance party and gig. as we drove, Ella took us through her latest set of song treasures. in one song, Regina Spektor defiantly announced to the four of us seated in Svetlana, 'après moi, la déluge.' after her did come the flood: Baxter and the blood which poured from his entrails. we pulled up to the makeshift parking lot in front of Em's exhibition bunker; her work hidden inside and pregnant with mute anticipation. Svetlana's red doors opened. then we, trying to avoid the waters above and sludge below, hop-skipped to the paved walkway leading to the bunker's entrance.

we were the first to arrive. we found Em and Robby waiting outside. she wore a black coat. he wore his camera to his eye. his lens gave Dianne considerable attention. she came over to me a little later to ask if I knew him. 'he is Em's brother. he's a kiff guy,' I assured her. he was studying photography in Stellenbosch. his photos of the exhibition would later reveal the emergence of a deft command of the craft. much like his sister and hers. but different. more grainy, less polished. the delicate installation she had produced was finished. Em had somehow managed to make ethereal the disembodied board-and-paper girl out of whom the work had grown. and she also revealed the violence in the polish.

'I threw a ball for Baxter but it was actually a grenade but he caught it so gently no one heard.' (Bingham, *BGE*)

'I want to tell the story again.' (Winterson, *Weight* xiii) I want to find the words which cowered behind silence in the park where Baxter lay. decimated. I want to move on. because there is violence in the polish. because I stood on Baxter's lip. because it can never be done until it is finished. until it is finished, the wound will continue to bleed, the heart will perpetually explode, I will stand at a loss—wanting. to share in the affectionate word.

that day the beginnings of a shift were impalpably evident. the warm of summer was shrinking back from the shadow. the Eastern Cape sky was unyielding and blue. and autumn had not yet begun to pluck the leaves off of Grahamstown's trees. instead, ants in their tidal numbers poured into our houses. they got everywhere: under our beds, in the

baths and showers, the kitchen, the lounge, the cracks in the couch. I was told they were desperate for water. how could I blame them? it was the height of the drought. and I was also desperate to assuage my thirst.

the afternoon was lazy. Em had not come to see me. she and Heidi were at my digs to practice a song with my digsmate, Stones, whose guitar skills she had managed to enlist for the piece she was to perform at *Singing for Soup* that night. it was a gig organised to raise funds for one of the soup kitchens in the location. I sat in on their practice, the performance before the performance. and when the music had stopped and the guitars been packed away, the two of us lingered in the afterglow of their melody. we talked. about how the pressure to present an artwork as finished was incompatible with the ways we were. as if a work – apart from the one finished work – can be called complete in a lifetime.

you could say we were exploring an aspect of what Derrida calls aporia. non-ways. the impossibility of arriving at an end while pressing on toward one. in truth, we were longing for new ways of being. paths not yet made in the back-alleys where we walked. for us, the walking was as important as the destination: Gan Eden. and the journey back to the Garden almost as precious as the Garden itself. because every step along the narrow road is holy ground.

in my lounge, we stood on holy ground. for the briefest moment, eternity closed in on us. it drew near and marked me with the sense that we were striking at matters more true than matter itself. before this point, the way back home had not been clear to my eyes because the years and neglect had buried it. but speaking together like we did, it seemed we were calling it out of loss as though it had always been. there. without interruption. from the firstborn days. before the curse.

I still ring with the sound of the death that tolled when my father and mother chose to eat the fruit.

when my father first discovered *wabi-sabi*, a Japanese aesthetic and worldview premised on the transient nature of creation, he always managed to work it into the few dinner conversations our family had.

it was a time of decline. we had lost the habit of eating together on a regular basis. our dinner table had been overwhelmed with computer and books and files. crossing over into the twenty-first century we had exchanged communion with each other for communion with the television and internet. the eight o'clock news on SABC 3. comedies and action series whose names have left my memory. Cartoon Network. MTV. soccer and cricket on Supersport. our shows seemed so pressing at the time. like the work my father was so busy with. commuting from Johannesburg to Cape Town. to the ends of the earth and back. Nigeria. Canada. Korea. Japan. as a result, the few times each year that we all found ourselves at the same table over a meal, a discussion about faith or politics would invariably flare up. just as the table was about to spontaneously burst into flames, my father would take charge of the topic and, with the weight of his fifty-something years of wisdom in his voice, say, 'everything is imperfect. everything is impermanent. everything is incomplete.'

to me, this observation strikes at an essential element of Em's work. particularly her board-and-paper girl experiment. in her write-up for her grad exhibition catalogue, she tells the half-caste's story:

A couple of years ago I made a rather dismal attempt at constructing a dissolving three-dimensional figure out of scraps of cut up board and paper.

The parts were sketched out roughly in charcoal, then cut at conflicting, awkward angles and drawn hastily together by a piece of thread. The thing clung to itself tenuously with the aid of a bit of tape, paper and glue, slapped on only as an afterthought. Finally the entire work was doused in coloured inks and left to disintegrate quietly in the corner of my studio.

It was an idea I had been itching to express, and in my naïve enthusiasm I forgot my ability to create cautiously. I just couldn't wait to see it – to see a quick model of what it might look like if I ever ended up creating it 'properly'. So this was simply the most immediate way to realize my envisioned figure in physical form. Ironically, this aesthetic (although deemed 'tacky' and unsuitable at the time) is something I have subsequently worked quite consciously to refine.

For months she dangled awkwardly above my make-shift studio space. Barely assembled, cross-legged with a single arm, handless and headless, she was to me a perfect expression of the intolerable and inevitably humorous process of trying. Not just trying to create, but trying to be. She held together on the brink of collapse, perched, paused between the second and third dimension, embracing the push toward an incomprehensible structure she was not yet ready to occupy. The increasing abstraction of form on account of her imminent collapse only endeared her to me all the more.

Eventually and reluctantly her transitory frame disappeared. But her relentless presence has sought residence in everything I touch or twist or slice.

This work is her wake, and an anti-monumental ode to her making.

(Bingham, *BGE*)

the months wrought the inevitable upon the figure hanging in the corner. suspended above Em's make-shift studio, the half-caste was a seed waiting to fall to the ground. on the day she finally slipped from matter into the soils of Em's imagination, she began to be something akin to a tree. growing out of everything Em touched and twisted and sliced. not taking root, but rather shifting from one labour to the next. loosely threaded. marking each work with her ephemeral spirit. doggedly resisting the push to grow straight. be called complete. closed.

unlike her, I have spent desperate years desperate to grow straight. praying to be called complete. closed. I have stood in the bathroom and shut my eyes. when I opened them again, it was still the same crookedness reflecting me in the mirror. I'd say this drivenness to be whole has come in part from the way I've been taught to know the world. the bias for closure I have inherited. closure in a linear sense, to be clear. that is, the world I have learned to know is on a linear journey toward some cathartic telos or revelation. within this frame of knowing, the whole point of history is its end.

but the seasons tell me another story about the nature of closure and time. the repeated

rhythms. the cycles of moon and sun. their government over the months, the days, the years. the planets in their orbits. transfixed. never shifting the pattern or moving out of place. each gliding at its own pace. in this system, catharsis is both the continual outworking of a cycle and the completion of a round. it is the redemptive death of winter – the stripping and respite from heat – and the wisdom of the seed. it is the often messy transition from one form to the next. convulsing into rest. the tearing, the blood, the afterbirth. the cry of the first breath. because to end is always to begin. the husk dying to life.

yet, I am also confronted by the mystery of inconclusive ends. which are abrupt. they bewilder and are filled with the too-muchness of pain. under the burden of questions they have raised, I stumbled from one failing to the next. straining for perfection. determined to reach the impossible ideal: closure.

in my obsession with closure, I have often forgotten how to laugh at the sometimes 'intolerable and inevitably humorous process of trying.' I forgot how to be. imperfect. incomplete. vulnerable to the disintegration which could wear me into a premature grave. like the board-and-paper girl. she was not ready for her life. she wasn't ready for her death either. but her body was broken. so is mine, and the world's. despite our best efforts to erect proud concrete to preserve us, the land shudders under Adam's curse. and all of our structures collapse. whether we find ourselves looking down on the city through an airplane window or standing over the sink brushing our teeth, we see the same reflection. a falling apart. our board-and-paper world.

it is always with us. on the brink of collapse. held together by a piece of thread. pushing us to embrace. the push toward some incomprehensible structure we are not yet ready to occupy.

as Em and I stood in my spartan living room during that pause between summer and the fall, another theme emerged: the playful subversion of the subversive. in response to some of the strategies that artists, working in the aftermath of Deconstruction's ravages, have employed in order to undermine Yeshua the Messiah and His totalising claims on reality, Em was looking to use the same tools to introduce faith back into the conversation. as it goes with all exceedingly clever designs, she was thinking of ways to subvert the initial subversion. a double negative of sorts.

needless to say, I was impressed with the subtlety of the tactic. to me, apart from faith art has no sense. it loses all its virtue. without a Creator to mimic, a Father to teach me how desire bears fruit, what is there for my spirit to echo and bring forth? if the life of the God-seed does not infuse my creativity, my creating is impotent. this is not to suggest that faith will magically make all things perfect. it will not. at least, not magically. what faith provides is a grid for me to process the anguish of an exploding world. somewhere in His heart and mind, the Omnipotent decided it was a valuable exercise to suffer at the hands of those He had created by becoming corruption so that we could have a second chance. to draw near to Him. begin again. be made increasingly right. faith helps me to reflect on my falling apart with a sober hope. because – after the ideals, after virtue, after submitting to the fact that I cannot escape the Creator's mark on my being – I still bear a Baxter-like

body. which has betrayed, and has been betrayed by, the forms I've been so anxious to conform to.

in other words, behind the heady plots to confound the postmodernists, there was an ache to bring faith right into the heart of the crisis. although our individual traumas were different, we were both trying to make sense of the mess we had found ourselves in. in my life, the law of home church culture, my many-headed father, was like iron. and I was red clay. trying to mimic his strength with my dust. always crumbling. interminably failing without knowing the cause. I was driven to perform. the wrong acts. for his approval, I strived. but the more I strove, the more I betrayed the different bodies which encoded me. I was out of control with shame and guilt, their fruit. and bitter with the wounds of histories I've never experienced: colonialism, the Natives Land Act (No. 27 of 1913), Apartheid, puritan Christendom's repression, the polygamy of my father's fathers.

'I am civilized but my needs are not. What is it that lashes in the darkness?' asks Alice, the protagonist of Jeanette Winterson's *Gut symmetries*. (12) she is troubled by urges that contradict the codes which govern her world. the civilised and proper modes of conduct. appropriate ways to be with fellow man. she has been fashioned to fit into a particular mould, but something in her blood agitates against those confines. within her, there is a tension between two desires. two hearts struggling for dominance over her body. one heart insists on remaining within the repressive borders of the civilisation which locates her, the other is drawn to breach the wall in order to find out what lashes in the dark beyond. as a result, the depth of the conflict between her cultivation and desire is acutely felt when she remarks, 'I am civilized but my needs are not.' the question which follows is as much a lucid articulation of her crisis as it is an invitation to journey toward discovery.

similar to the way Winterson's body of work is consumed by the problem of desire and boundaries, I have been eaten up by an absurd conflict between desire and faith. Alice's question struck my bones the first time I read it. I still echo with her words. for years I had tried to put my finger on it but couldn't grasp what was lashing in the dark. instead, all I laid hold of were the sickly fruits of transgression and hope deferred. it was a wonderfully destructive cycle. turning and returning me to all those times I was thrown a mistaken ball – threw it myself, even – and exploded right in front of the person (father, lover, friend) with whom I played.

my father never played with me. well, almost never. there was one occasion where he wandered out into the garden for twenty-odd minutes of childish abandonment. a brief burst of funlight. then he retreated back into the cerebral fortifications of his study. to resume the principle task of life: work, hard and incessant.

it was a Saturday, a not-quite sort of day. Shabbat. my two siblings and I never really knew what to do with ourselves on Shabbat. we were not Jewish. nor were we mainstream Christians. and we had not yet realised how much we longed for a place where we could rest. to compound our unease, being half Venda and half Zambian we mostly resembled

everyone else—but not quite either. the colonial project – both cultural and religious – had been a resounding success in our house. we spoke English so well, us kids, that everyone we met marvelled. also, the decrees of Mr Armstrong, the founder of our church movement, were a sceptre to our family. even in his death, his precepts shattered the social aspirations of my brother's, my sister's and my weekends.

as the firstfruits of the liberation struggle were beginning to ripen, in 1991 we were cursed with the double blessing of being among the first wave of families to move into the non-black suburbs of Johannesburg. Waterval Estate. 12 Botha Avenue. it was a simple three-bedroom house with a study and a large garden. the stump of a once-grand tree stood in the middle of our playing field. I must have been nine or ten the day he took part in the garden games, my dad. together with Rendani and Kutama, the four of us played french cricket. until, in the exuberance of his delight, he hit the ball over the wall. the laughter and game whacked dead.

leaving us on the grass, he proceeded to disappear to his books. to become the spectre he was to be. later. during our years of upheaval and change. appearing suddenly at three-to-six month intervals, he would tell us that our academic performance was not good enough. we could never live up to the standard his genius, teenage self had set. the young man of sixteen who managed to maintain the top grades in his class while supporting his mother and three siblings after the untimely death of his father.

he haunted me. his manifold self overwhelmed my waif-like spirit. his absence wounded me more than the blows of his presence. wherever I went, famine followed. a famine of touch and words.

perhaps this was the original ball, the explosion before the explosion. before the mirror Baxter raised.

perhaps all this labour is is a meditation on fathering. a working through the consequences of the well-meaning but devastating effects of a father's touch—or lack of it. at least, this is where my engagement with Em's work has led me: to Adam and the many fathers after him who prepared the ground for my undoing. but Baxter and the board-and-paper girl also gave me a glimpse of something hopeful. somehow their crumbling histories made me believe that, if I could make the impossible exodus from my corrupted sources to the original spring, my fathers' houses back home, I would cease to be crooked. then the new ways of being I had been feeling my way toward would finally become. announce themselves in my second try. the one after the flood.

it is also possible that the work is simply an attempt to grieve over the ways transgression has marked me. how I exploded on my own accord and violated my heart. how I was Baxter in the park, trusting that I wouldn't be harmed by my playmate. how I was spurned. it's had a profound effect on me, the sense of loss which has accompanied my sins and wounds. it has hollowed me out. so my writing could well be an effort to mourn what can no longer be counted. that which is no more there. as well as to lay the remains bare. to let the heavens air them.

ultimately, I am on a search for light. if the night sky is as true as it appears to be, there must be a lamp for my feet in this darkness.

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